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GOETHE AND LITERARY CRITICISM

GOETHE is the supreme example in modern literature of the genius whose works are so many aspects of a rich and dramatic personal career. It is sometimes said that Boswell's *Life* is Johnson's greatest work, Lockhart's *Life* Scott's greatest work, but Goethe was his own Boswell, his own Lockhart, and how much more besides! His oft-quoted remark that his works were "fragments of a great confession" points us to the biography behind the poetry, and the abundant evidence we have for every phase of his life has enabled scholars to place each fragment in its context. The present discussion is concerned, necessarily in a very hasty way, with the literary part of this context, with the poet's attitude toward the literature which meant most to him. But we cannot separate the literature from the life. Occasionally, indeed, a great spirit keeps to his books. Such a situation is implied in Landor's epigram:

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife;
Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,—
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

Here the fire of life burns on the hearth of a library, and the aged poet celebrates his withdrawal from a world in which many things are irrelevant to his view both of "nature" and of "art." But an even greater man would find many things worth his strife, and would wrestle with this world for its blessing as Jacob wrestled with the angel. The figure is Goethe's; he uses it when he tells how he won

insight from Herder at Strasburg. He does not counsel a retirement to the merely contemplative life, but catches the notes of an angelic chorus: "Whosoever is unflagging in his striving forever, him we can redeem."

Our present task is not to study Goethe's "sources," survey his reading, or appraise his scholarship. The poet does not read for the sake of mere imitation or erudition. Rather he appropriates books; he seizes on them and assimilates them. They are wrought into a program of self-culture, but not into a set curriculum. When Faust sets about translating the Gospel of John into his beloved German, he pauses at the first sentence, "In the beginning was the *logos*." Surely, he argues, this cannot mean, "In the beginning was the *word*." The word is not to be rated so highly. Nor is it accurate to say, "In the beginning was the *thought*." Is it thought which works and creates? Rather it is power, or better still, the deed itself. Faust then writes with confidence, "In the beginning was the *deed*." Surely it is not forcing matters to read into this passage Goethe's conviction that the heritage of European culture is living and dynamic.

What from your fathers' heritage is lent,
Earn it anew, to really possess it!

This eagerness to put great literature to work is one of the most striking aspects of Goethe's quest for culture. To American ears the word unfortunately suggests something snobbish and superior. To Goethe it meant more than we can say, but perhaps it would not be far wrong to describe it as meaning a way of life which would give full play to his magnificent powers. Steadily, even ruthlessly, Goethe strove toward this end. He was moreover the first and the greatest genius to work under the conditions imposed by the modern world. He lived through three gen-

erations of increasing complexity and confusion; he saw the break-up of the old ideals of Reason which had ruled the Enlightenment, and he saw too the dubious triumph of Romanticism. His world imposed on him the problem of selecting and organizing the multifarious details of life; his versatility exposed him to the full impact of the new forces let loose in Western Europe. One example out of many will illustrate his situation. When he was in Sicily the landscape brought back to him the Phaeacian episode in the *Odyssey*, and he began to plan a drama on the subject of Nausicaa. From this point a Renaissance poet would have stuck to his Homer and his Greek dramatists. But Goethe looked out again at the rich vegetation of Sicily and began to ponder one of his favorite scientific ideas, that of the primordial plant. Whereupon he complains in one of his letters:

My pet poetical purpose was obstructed; the garden of Alcinous vanished altogether—a real garden of the world had taken its place. Why is it that we moderns have so little concentration of mind? Why is it that we are thus tempted to make demands which we cannot possibly fulfil?

In the adjustment of these conflicting claims the modern man needs all the help that poets and critics can give him. But here we must note a divergence between Goethe and the Anglo-Saxon mind. We are likely to think of the struggle among interests as moral in a narrow sense. We call for some evangelist to give us a four-square gospel, and there we stand. The Anglo-Saxon goes into the moral fight doggedly and truculently; Goethe went into it with gusto and a free swing, "rejoicing as a strong man to run a race." Hence the notion of Goethe as pagan and egoist which has had wide currency in Great Britain and America. He was not always at a high tension morally, and Carlyle's attempt to make him into the modern equivalent of a Hebrew

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prophet touches only one side of his genius. "Close thy Byron, open thy Goethe," cries Carlyle as he tries to separate the sheep from the goats. But Goethe himself recognized no such division, and opened his Byron as well as his Shakespeare and his Homer. Again, the ruthlessness of Goethe's quest for culture confronts us in the opening lines of *In Memoriam*:

I held it truth, with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.

But who shall so forecast the years
And find in loss a gain to match?
Or reach a hand thro' time to catch
The far-off interest of tears?

Tennyson himself tells us that the first stanza refers to Goethe. The Englishman is too sentimental or too constant to sacrifice a past to a future. Among our poets only Arnold, in his *Memorial Verses* and *Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann*, has given memorable expression to his sense of Goethe's triumph over the problems of modern life. Arnold's profound comments contrast Goethe's detached calm with the world-weariness of the younger generation. Although they apply strictly only to the Goethe of the last period, nevertheless the contrast between the apostle of European culture and the Victorian who is wrestling with a problem and looking for a gospel is well pointed.

It follows that Goethe has a natural, unaffected, and healthy attitude toward literature. There are, as we shall see, touches of feverish zeal in the literary enthusiasms of his youth; there are blind spots and fits of exclusiveness in his middle period; there are strange valuations, and, it seems to us, mistakes in judgment. But Goethe as a reader and a critic is never musty, or affected, or insincere. His interest

in abstract truth is always very moderate, and he never troubles to set down an elaborate critical system. Aesthetic principles came to his attention chiefly as he found them embodied in works of art which interested him. He succeeded in being tolerant without being flabby or amiable. Tennyson shrewdly remarked of him that he always said the best he could about an author. Since he seldom (except perhaps in his middle period) took over-sharp positions on critical issues, he was not confronted by the yawning gap between literary criticism and literary creation which opens up for the judicial critic and the dogmatist. The "New Humanists" of our own time say much that Goethe would agree with, but their contention that virtually all modern literature is spiritually unsound would give him pause. They do not tell the modern poet how to use books. They are too much inclined to judge a writer merely by his expressed opinions about literature; they are, indeed, more interested in critics than in authors. Goethe's criticism, on the other hand, is free of the curse of the academic. To unite criticism and creation as he did is truly to play the part of "physician to the iron age." In order to understand history, said he, we have to live through history; and Germany could hope to have sound literary criticism only so far as she had a literature. This attitude Goethe nicknamed "productive." Thus he describes the impact of the work of the Persian poet Hafiz upon him about 1815: "I had to take a productive attitude toward it, for otherwise I could not have maintained myself in the presence of such a powerful phenomenon. The effect was too intense." That is, criticism for Goethe was not merely a matter of framing neat opinions about literature, or airing good ideas which happened to occur to him; rather it meant assimilation and mastery of irresistible influences—influences so powerful that they

forced him to take a position toward them. An expression of Emerson's may help us out here. In the words of great men, we read in the essay on *Self-Reliance*, our own thoughts come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Goethe strove to naturalize this alienated majesty, to make it his own familiar possession. The origins of his poetry and his criticism lie close together. He said that he wrote "occasional poetry" and we may add that he wrote also "occasional criticism"—not "occasional" in the sense of "casual," but in the sense that it was a response to his own imperative needs.

In the long run, Goethe never let a literary dogma lure him away from a workable half-truth, or rather from complementary half-truths. Such a set of half-truths appears in the old debate on originality versus imitation. The relation of the young poet to the great geniuses who have gone before had interested literary critics in the early Renaissance, and the subject attracted special attention in the eighteenth century. The leaders of the Storm and Stress movement in Germany never tired of urging the genius to be himself. In the midst of convention and imitation, the true genius would return to the primordial source of inspiration within. He would imitate, not the works of nature, but nature at work. This gospel had been set forth brilliantly by the aged poet of the *Night Thoughts*, Edward Young, in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), which was translated and admired in Germany, though it is not to be thought of as a primary source of the doctrine. Young provided catch words and telling phrases:

He that imitates the divine *Iliad* does not imitate Homer, but he who takes the same method which Homer took for arriving at a capacity of accomplishing a work so great.

Thyself so reverence, as to prefer the native growth of thy own mind to the richest import from abroad.

Goethe sometimes says things to the same effect:

Not in Rome, in Magna Graecia, but in your own heart is joy to be found.

He applies the doctrine of originality on a national scale :

The whole world, extensive as it is, is only an expanded fatherland, and will, if looked at aright, be able to give us no more than what our home soil can endow us with also.

But a difference in emphasis immediately appears. Goethe, under the influence of Herder, sees poetry not merely as the spontaneous outburst of an isolated soul, but as the natural outgrowth of an individuality which uses for its own ends the rich inheritance of culture and tradition. To belittle learning rightly used would be to belittle the food we eat and the air we breathe. There is no clash of issues here, but rather the problem of a working adjustment. The question of originality versus imitation as it was posed in Goethe's day called for tact rather than dialectical subtlety. Against the mechanical imitation of the neo-classicists it was necessary to present one front; against the robustious fellows who proclaimed themselves invincibly original it was necessary to present another.

It is characteristic of Goethe's career that he almost always found the teachers he needed, in science, literature, and the fine arts. During the months when he sat at the feet of Herder in Strasburg, he was learning how a poet might rightly draw inspiration from the literature of the past. Herder was an enthusiast for the primitive. He had learned from older contemporaries the gospel of a return to nature. But the modern way of returning to nature is not to reject tradition altogether, but to seek the recovery of an uncontaminated tradition. It was in this spirit that the early Renaissance had exalted Greek literature; it was in this spirit that the leaders of the Reformation had tried to return to the very letter of the Bible. And

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to Goethe's generation, the generation which came after the Enlightenment, the Renaissance itself offered a great tradition to which ardent youth might return. The enthusiasts of the late eighteenth century were continuing the quest for an art which should be not merely artistic, but the original and authentic utterance of humanity. Their gallery of originals may seem to us fantastic and uncritical—folksong in general, Homer, Shakespeare, Ossian, the Old Testament. The list might be extended. Goethe would have added about the year 1772 the poet Pindar and the architect of Strasburg Cathedral, Erwin of Steinbach. A movement like the Storm and Stress depends largely on the power of great names and watchwords to evoke enthusiasm. In the literary projects of this period Goethe does not turn merely to the obscure and naïve, but to the careers of prophets and founders; he plans to dramatize the careers of Caesar, Prometheus, Mahomet, and Socrates. The story of *Werther*, the greatest of sentimental novels, presents a hero who longs to get back to the well-spring of being, and is tragically at odds with the modern world, but who at the same time sees life through the medium of literature. He is dominated in the first part of the story by idyllic visions evoked by Homer, in the last part by the vague, stormy, and swelling rhetoric of Ossian. One side of late eighteenth-century literature was eclectic and cosmopolitan. Minor writers in England, for example, tried to compound poetry by combining themes and suggestions from the most diverse sources—"to mingle Attic art with Shakespeare's fire," as one of them put it. This was of course mere diletantism, but a parallel development in Goethe's career derives from the literary cosmopolitanism which Herder expounded to him at Strasburg. Strasburg Cathedral itself represented this rich diversity for the young Goethe, but one

of his biographers suggests another symbol, likewise drawn from architecture. George Brandes tells us that when he stood before St. Mark's in Venice, uniting the antique, the Gothic, and the oriental, he involuntarily murmured to himself, "Goethe." The Goethe of later years would have been shocked by the comparison; in his account of his Italian journey he condemns St. Mark's as tasteless and barbarous. Yet Brandes gives us here, with some exaggeration, an important truth about the poet. In the 1770's Goethe was on the road which led to the proclamation of the Schlegels that romantic poetry is inclusive and universal, and to his own doctrine of "world literature."

But even among these universalities the soul must have a home. Starting from the artificial French culture into which he was initiated at Leipzig, Goethe has got out into the open, and formulates literary plans with a daring which reminds us of Bacon's famous saying, "I have taken all knowledge to be my province." The Renaissance was one of the great foci for Goethe and his comrades of the Storm and Stress. But the Renaissance was also the period of heightened national feeling. In all this welter of themes, those which were both Renaissance and German took the strongest hold on the poet, and came so close to him that he hid his concern with them even from his master Herder.

I most carefully concealed from him my interest in certain subjects which had rooted themselves within me, and were, little by little, molding themselves into poetic form. These were *Götz von Berlichingen* and *Faust*. The biography of the former had seized my inmost heart. The figure of a rude, well-meaning self-helper, in a wild anarchical time, awakened my deepest sympathy. The significant puppet-show fable of the latter resounded and vibrated many-toned within me. I too had wandered about in all sorts of science, and had early enough been led to see its vanity. I had, moreover, tried all sorts of ways in real life, and had always returned more unsatisfied and troubled.

The stormy and nebulous passions of the youthful genius center about the subjects that have both a deeply national

and a deeply personal appeal. The fervent poetry of a writer like Klopstock had presented a sentimental Protestant soul *in vacuo*. The young Goethe had admired Klopstock, and inherited from his pietistic tradition the conception of a highly subjective and confessional poetry couched in free rhythms. But this poetry, he thought, should be embodied in significant matter; it should work upon and in the stuff of tradition. Goethe's incorrigible preference for the concrete over the abstract appears in this period, and in a sense determines his whole career. The ideal of a concrete, concentrated, and poignant poetry is clearly present to him, and keeps him from the worst excesses of the Storm and Stress. He has his moments of titanic rebelliousness and romantic ecstasy, but at heart he is moderate and humane. He hears the thunder of the wheels of Pindar's chariot, but the next moment the homely accents of the man on the street reach his ear. In his romantic historical drama, *Götz von Berlichingen*, we do not find the rant and chaos of the Storm and Stress. The principle that governs the play is variety, and many of the scenes are filled with humorous realism and common sense. The drama is in some respects as bourgeois as one of Scott's novels. Even *Werther*, the delight of all the sentimentalist of Western Europe during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, achieved its effects because it was deeply rooted in the bourgeois life of the time; it was specific, homely, and palpable, whereas the typical sentimental story was vague, pretentious, and impalpable. And the greatest work of the period, the early *Faust*, shows in the highest degree the same concentration and poignancy. The central theme of the original Faust story, the reaction of devout Protestantism to the profane learning of the Renaissance, was the pact between Faust and the devil. Goethe did not undervalue the advantage

a poet enjoys in linking his work with a theme deeply embedded in the consciousness of the folk. But he made the historical context his own. It was the plasticity of the theme that attracted him. He planned a great sequence which should be in some way a synthesis of all his youthful moods—cynicism, pessimism, free humor, piety, exaltation, love, and despair. It was inevitable that the theological side of the legend should be subordinated to the human, and it is significant that the incomplete version of *Faust* which dates from the early years at Weimar should be concerned with the tragedy of Gretchen. Here again, the theme has points of contact with sentimental fiction and middle-class life. Against the background of a provincial German town is set a tragedy so profound and simple as far to transcend the violence of Storm and Stress or the delicacies of sentimentalism. In the later text of the prison-scene occurs a line which might serve as one of the touchstones of poetry. Bayard Taylor translates it inadequately:

Mankind's collective woe o'erwhelms me here.

To use a passage from Wordsworth of which this line reminds me, we hear in this supreme scene and in the whole Gretchen story,

The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh, nor grating; though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.

German archaism, the humanitarian feeling of the eighteenth century, and Goethe's own experience converge here to produce not only the greatest work of this period, but his highest achievement in tragedy. The result shows how out of influence comes something more than influence. The very word "tragedy" may give us pause. Nothing is more characteristic of Goethe than the way he cuts across any traditional classification of literary works by types. *Götz* is

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Storm and Stress drama with a difference, *Werther* the sentimental novel with a difference, while *Faust* bursts the bonds of any formal definition of tragedy.

Romantic ages show a decided preference for youthful poets. About the complexity and vividness of Goethe's early work there hovers a charm which seems incomparable, a "first fine careless rapture." But his spirit traveled almost incalculable distances from the year 1775, when he left his native Frankfurt for the tiny provincial capital of Weimar, up to his death in 1832, and though we find no short span of time in all those decades which surpasses in significance the period 1772-1776, there is never the shock of an anticlimax. Goethe always looked back on his own past with the keenest interest, but he never yielded to the sentimental longing to get back to that past and settle down there. On the other hand, he did not make the dramatic but insincere gesture of breaking sharply with his past. Amazing shifts in his literary opinions and practices appear, but there is never a break in his integrity. We may try to explain these changes by pointing out that his interests became more and more social and practical, that his studies in the fine arts and in natural science had important effects on his literary work, that the age changed and that he changed with it, that important new loves and friendships appeared, especially his attachment to Frau von Stein and his alliance with Schiller. The change can be partly described in terms of his standards and preferences in the arts. If the spirit of the earlier period finds its commentary in Shakespeare, the homely plays of the Nuremberg shoemaker Hans Sachs, and the Dutch and Flemish genre painters, the spirit of the middle period may be symbolized by the stately figures of classical drama and sculpture.

Here, as so often happened, Goethe's personal needs

coincided with what the age had to offer him. After his establishment at Weimar he became more and more concerned with what we may somewhat heavily call problems of organization. The poet in his imaginative activity, the plastic artist in his study of the infinite variations of form and color, the politician who is working to build a state, the scientist in his quest for types and principles—all of these must somehow find unity. Goethe could at times rest satisfied with the varied pattern of things that are in a sense one because they are all in a life. Thus, in his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, he tells us of an exciting period in his boyhood at Frankfurt when he was deeply interested at the same time in his love-affair with Gretchen and in the coronation ceremonies of the Holy Roman Empire. The two themes are set off against one another like separate lines of plot-action in an Elizabethan play. But even of *Götz* in its original form Goethe tells us:

I indeed perceived that in my attempt to renounce unity of time and place, I had also infringed upon that higher unity which is so much the more required. . . . This defect, or rather this culpable superfluity, I soon perceived, since the nature of my poetry always impelled me to unity.

As we pass into the Weimar period, this demand for unity becomes more insistent, and is reënforced in many ways.

I have said that the late eighteenth century was eclectic, that it looked backward to various ages and models, and worked out diverse routes by which modern man could recover aesthetic inspiration. While Herder was preaching Shakespeare, Homer, and Ossian, Winckelmann was exalting as the model of true art the "noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur" of the Greeks. The neo-classical standards which had spread from France all over western Europe in the age of Louis XIV were Latin rather than Greek; Winckelmann's Hellenism had the freshness and the sense

of re-discovery which are necessary to enlist disciples and evoke their enthusiasm. One of the most interesting of Goethe's early poems, *The Wanderer*, gives this approach to classical antiquity: a weary traveler meets a young mother with her child at her breast, and she leads him up a hill to her hut amid the ruins of an ancient temple, where he finds rest and refreshment. To the youthful poet the broken columns of the temple of Venus and the simple domestic scene alike signify the genius of nature. The composition points forward to the later Goethe; the story of humanity is to be spelled out in the alphabet of Greek sculpture and architecture. Abrupt and passionate impulses are to be subdued to the aesthetic principles set forth by Winckelmann. The ideal of tranquillity (*Stille* or sometimes *Friede*) becomes central, sometimes conceived of as peace after the storms of life, sometimes as a superb detachment unshaken by those storms. To this are added the ideal of generality of meaning which requires that a statue shall represent *man*, not *a man*, and the further ideal of limitation in form, which requires that the artist shall shun the vague and the fragmentary. The symbol of this art is not a genre picture or a Gothic ruin, but a snow-white marble statue, or a building in the neo-classical style of Palladio.

In a genius of lesser power such a restriction of the scope of art would mean a cold formalism, or a sickly and sentimental longing for a vanished past. The statues are bloodless, the forms rigid. How different is this after all from the stiff standards of neo-classicism? Goethe, it must be said, does not entirely escape the dangers of this position. But it is always a way of life, not an alphabet of types or forms, which he seeks. The ancient model must be appropriated and realized, not merely followed in externals. Occasionally Goethe, like the Renaissance admirers of an-

tiquity, is forced into an attitude of excessive humility; we are the epigoni, the puny heirs of a great tradition. "Yet it is a fine thing to be an imitator of Homer, even the last one." This road led Goethe to Rome, as the great repository of classical antiquity, the medium through which Greek culture was transmitted to the modern world. But this movement of Goethe's genius cannot be described merely as the quest of an abstract ideal. It was in a sense racial; Goethe inherited it not only from his father, whose youthful tour of Italy was the great event of his life, but from those generations of northern poets—Chaucer and the minnesingers and many others—who found color and clarity south of the Alps. It was not really an escape from his age, but rather almost disappointingly of his age. Goethe's experience in Italy was the experience of the eighteenth century, far more memorable and important, but nevertheless in line with the Italy which travelers had found before him. They too had neglected Florence, had made much of Bologna's examples of Palladian architecture, and had exalted Rome. They too had ignored the "springtime of art" in Italy, and had admired the dignity and tranquillity of the later Raphael. The student or reader of English literature will find it an initiation in aesthetic theory to compare Browning's Italy with Goethe's. The subject invites me into a path which I cannot follow. Suffice it to say that in the period of the Italian journey Goethe is chiefly occupied in trying to organize his observations in a scientific and critical way. Much of his work at this time is on the border-line between science and art. He views Italian culture as a natural growth, and his study and practice in drawing and painting lead him to his long preoccupation with optics. He even tells us that since literary criticism had not given him a broad enough basis for literary creation, he was

seeking deeper foundations in natural science. Italy was to give him, he hoped, not merely models but principles and methods.

These principles were not applied in a direct and rigid manner in his most important poetry. His nominally classical pieces are landmarks but not culminating points in his career. He planned a Homeric epic, the *Achilleis*, as a kind of link between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and in spite of Schiller's advice insisted on a close imitation of the Homeric style, but the work did not "go on kindling," and only one canto was completed. The *Helena* fragment, written on the model of Greek tragedy, was taken up into the larger unity of *Faust*. The *Roman Elegies* remain as the most accurate expression in verse of the moods recorded in the Italian journal and letters. But all this was caviare to the general. More important and characteristic are the works in which the subsidence of the Storm and Stress impulses can be clearly observed, so that the modern speaks through ancient forms. Goethe's most important works do not fall neatly into given years; they mature slowly through considerable periods of time, and respond gradually and inevitably, though not always consistently, to the changes in his personality. Thus the drama of *Egmont* was begun in Frankfurt and finished twelve years later in Rome. The subject points us back to Goethe's youth: German nationalism was stirred by the struggle of the homely Netherlanders against the rigid and arrogant Spanish rule; and the patriot Egmont, with his tragic error of judgment, has some connection with the romantic hero who is the victim of his own temperament. This theme could not possibly be classicized; the change in Goethe appears in the calm, almost undramatic way in which the subject is treated. More eloquent of the transition is *Iphigenie*, also finished in Rome

as a re-working of an earlier prose version. Here Goethe takes up the great theme of the sorrows of the house of Tantalus, which has moved the imagination of dramatists from Aeschylus to Eugene O'Neill. The sins of the fathers have been visited upon the children; Iphigenia has found shelter as a priestess in the Crimea; Orestes has run mad after he has avenged on his mother the murder of his father. A curse descends from generation to generation; ancient tragedy and modern science would agree that mourning becomes Iphigenia as well as her sister Electra. But Goethe is a modern and a humanitarian; he does not accept the ancient doctrine of hereditary guilt. The optimism of the eighteenth century keeps him from plunging his characters into hopeless catastrophe, and tells him that the situation may be redeemed by the virtue of the heroine. Back of the stately poses and majestic verse lurks an intention to save mankind from the worst that fate might do. Orestes is cured, and virtue rewarded. When Goethe was at Bologna he saw a picture of St. Agatha after the manner of Raphael, which, he said, reminded him of his own Iphigenia. Christian rather than pagan art best illustrates his humanitarian drama. Later, at the height of his classicism, he came to feel that art could express the moral only through the sensuous, and disapproved of his own drama because, as he said, it had more soul than body. The third play of this period, *Tasso*, obviously connects with the Italian journey in its subject, and with neo-classicism, rather than classicism, in its manner. The theme of the sensitive court poet Tasso driven to frenzy and madness by the hostility of a prosaic world might earlier have been treated in the manner of *Werther*, but Goethe chooses to deal with it by balancing in eighteenth-century fashion *Vernunft* against *Schwärmerei*, "sense" against "sensibility." The characters are

formal and elegant, and there is surprisingly little Italian color. Goethe not only accepts eighteenth-century optimism by suggesting that Tasso may struggle through to rationality and happiness, but he also accepts in essentials the formal code of the eighteenth-century court, humanized by good taste and sympathy. Common to all these dramas is the hopeful and conciliatory attitude toward human nature and human fate. Goethe could no longer say at this time, "Mankind's collective woe o'erwhelms me here." There is also a tendency to present characters of a high degree of generality; Iphigenia is the tender strength of womanhood, and Tasso not so much the actual author of the *Jerusalem Delivered* as the malcontent poet *par excellence*. Along with this goes an almost uniform decrease in concrete and characteristic detail. *Egmont* necessarily keeps much local color, but *Iphigenie* is played against the background of a classical temple, like the French tragedies of the seventeenth century, and *Tasso* does not make full use of Goethe's experiences in Italy.

The middle stage of Goethe's journey is best known to the general reader through *Hermann und Dorothea*. This most delightful poem is written in classical hexameters, and divided into books named after the nine Muses; it treats humble life with Homeric simplicity and dignity, and with a rigid observance of the unities of time, place, and action. Critics who are out of sympathy with Goethe's classical experiments sometimes judge it severely; it is cold, says Professor Robertson; it is a mere literary pastime, says the Italian philosopher Croce. The interesting fact remains that it is the one long poem of Goethe's which is at the same time popular and in some sense classical. Goethe's Victorian biographer, George Henry Lewes, thought it his most perfect work. The poem may be described as an idyll

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of German domesticity, but I think it would be inaccurate to say that we have here just homely matter poured into the alien mold of the hexameter. In the peaceful life of the German burgher, the prudential virtues were prized above everything else. It was not a life of vague aspirations and loose ends, and it knew progress, if at all, only under the form of Tennyson's essentially bourgeois description of freedom, as it

slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent.

An enlightened and dignified bourgeois view of life, purified of pettiness and stupidity, would have points of contact with what we may call a classical view, though I would not wish to be understood as saying that they are identical. Goethe seems to have felt that the classical and the bourgeois came close enough together to give him artistic congruity. *Hermann und Dorothea*, then, is a skilful adaptation of a special theme to the exacting standards of formal classicism, and such an adaptation was possible only because of some kind of pre-established harmony between form and content. Goethe kept out of his poem both the sentimentalism which tended to melt down all form into a mere flux of feeling, and the romanticism which, as in *Faust*, tended to break out of bounds. *Hermann und Dorothea* has something in common with the pastoral, the artificial epic, and the middle-class drama of the age, but cannot be classified under any of these types. As in all neo-classical work, the subject is carefully restricted. The worthies of the little Rhineland town where the action is laid know the French Revolution only because a throng of homeless fugitives streams along the high road nearby. The youth Hermann sees among them the noble girl Dorothea, and she is drawn into the charmed circle of the peaceful community. The problems of life are simpli-

fied, and Goethe lets us imagine for the nonce that such happily closed cycles of existence are to be found amid the confusion of the modern world.

The famous friendship and alliance between Goethe and Schiller is partly a cause, partly a confirmation and illustration, of Goethe's classicism. To simplify a very complex situation, we may say that the main current of Goethe's genius set toward sensible actualities, Schiller's toward the abstract, the ideal, and the rhetorical. The difference was memorably expounded by Schiller himself, the more articulate and systematic critic of the two, and his account of Goethe's genius is of the first importance because it reacted directly on Goethe's own conception of his work. Never have criticism and creation been more closely allied. Goethe expected the critic to bring him not a static creed or explanation after the fact, but a set of suggestions and directions which he could apply in the future. In the famous essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Schiller made a distinction between the naïve genius who finds his ideal ready to hand in the nature actually present to him, and thus produces a simple and objective art, and the sentimental genius who is at a remove from his desire, and projects in poetry the ideal which he does not find in nature. Goethe is then, Schiller thinks, the most naïve of modern poets, the most direct and objective. But for the modern poet, he adds, complete naïveté is impossible; the complexities of our civilization cannot be set aside. Thus the return to classical antiquity is along a romantic path; when one longs for the classical one is romantic. In *The Gods of Greece* Schiller looks back to a lost world of beauty:

Where art thou, beauteous world of story?
Fair morning of a vanished day!
Alas, the magic of thine ancient glory
Lives only in the poet's lay.¹

¹ Calvin Thomas's translation.

The mysterious child Mignon in *Wilhelm Meister* sings the famous song, "Know ye the land," in which Goethe's longing for Italy is most memorably expressed. We note the classic grace and firmness of the structure, but we note also the exotic foliage, the mountain landscape, the "addition of strangeness to beauty" in the description of classical architecture and sculpture. The total effect is unmistakably romantic. In a relatively simple culture like that of the Homeric poems, or in a culture artificially simplified, like that of *Hermann und Dorothea*, complete preoccupation with what is immediately given may be called naïve or classical. But in a complex culture such single-mindedness is impossible. In other words, the door is opened for the bewildering complexity of *Faust*. "Two souls dwell within my breast," cries Goethe's hero. Faust's temperament is "sentimental" in Schiller's sense, and the poet-critic brings out in his aesthetic writings tendencies and principles already implicit in Goethe's character and work.

Not that the critical principles fully account for the poetry. We see that theory and practice were not completely adjusted when we remember that Goethe resumed *Faust* during the Italian period and the years immediately following (1788-1790), and that he took up the work again during the years of his association with Schiller (1797-1805). His preoccupation with Homeric style leads him to speak with self-conscious depreciation of the northern, the Germanic *Faust*. In his correspondence with Schiller he calls the poem a "barbaric composition," a "trage-laph" (goat-stag). In verses once designed to stand at the end of *Faust I* he asks, "Who delights to describe the chaos of feeling, when the path leads him onward to clarity? Closed be the limited cycle of barbarism, with all its magic." This is not to be taken seriously as self-criticism, but it shows

that Goethe was confronted with the problem of somehow reconciling the romantic with the classical.

As we follow his career into the nineteenth century, we find that he would not be pressed into the service of any literary faction or any binding literary program. They draw these lines more sharply in the Latin countries, and when Goethe's attention was drawn in 1827 to a conflict between Italian classicism and Italian romanticism, he disposed of it in a short notice headed "Modern Guelfs and Ghibellines." Such battles of the books were, he felt, harsh and sterile. His much quoted remark that the classic is healthy, the romantic diseased, does not commit him to a narrow partisanship, for he lets us know that he considers both Homer and the *Nibelungenlied* classical, and that he thinks of the label "romantic" as applying particularly to certain morbid developments in French, German, and English literature. He prefers other pairs of terms—Schiller's "naïve" and "sentimental," or "objective" and "subjective." But most important of all is the distinction between the organic and the inorganic in art. The true work of art is a natural growth, not an artificial compound. The real problem, then, is the exact relation of nature to art. Is the artist's creative working simply an event in nature like the blowing of the west wind or the eruption of a volcano? The Storm and Stress of Goethe's youth had argued as much, and had felt that when there was a conflict between set rule and creative energy, the rule had to go by the board while the artist followed his unpredictable and mysterious impulse. But the complete submergence of art in a lawless nature leads to anarchy. When the poet as critic tries to avoid this extreme he takes the other path, and merges nature in the artist. He would have it that the great work of art represents a reconciliation and a coöperation between nature or

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instinct and the law. The very need for significant and adequate expression, natural as it is, imposes form on the utterance. The romanticist's emphasis on freedom and spontaneity, the classicist's emphasis on unalterable law, would then take their place as partial views of this profound and complex truth. If this be Goethe's critical doctrine, he did not set it up as an orthodoxy to which all must subscribe, but rather as a truth which dawns upon the artist as he works. The exact framing of the creed is not important; when Goethe needs a rule or a doctrine he often borrows it. Thus he takes from the great Italian Manzoni a neat statement of what "productive criticism" should ask about a work of art: "What is the author's purpose? Is this purpose reasonable and sensible? How far has he succeeded in carrying it out?" A like catholicity appears in another saying of Goethe's: "Let every one be a Greek in his own way, but—let him be a Greek." We almost hear the eighteenth-century critic Young urging the poet to emulate Homer's originality by refusing to imitate Homer.

Goethe's tolerance in practice was even greater than his tolerance in theory. With his fine feeling for the conditions under which modern man has to live, he does not urge upon us an uncompromising classicism which would force us to break with our own time. In *Faust II* he transports his Helena from a Greek palace to a mediaeval castle. She hears the strange cadences of modern rime and music, and Mephistopheles, disguised as the grotesque hag Phorkyas, sings:

Hark! the music, pure and golden;
Free from fables be at last!
All your Gods, the medley olden,
Let depart! their day is past.¹

Of the union of Faust and Helena is born the boy Eupho-

¹ Bayard Taylor's translation.

rion, who represents the mingled sensuality and aspiration of modern poetry as incarnated in Byron. After a mad and orgiastic scene the boy falls dead at his parents' feet, and the Chorus sings a dirge which is at once a tribute to Byron and a description of the eternal conflict between will and law. Here Goethe could not remain aloof; he felt that the way of mankind lay through Byron's career, not in some peaceful detour, and he could even envy the poet his fate. When he remarked to Eckermann, "Byron is not antique and not romantic, but like the present day itself," he presumably meant that one could not take a narrowly partisan view of the problems of modern life. From his Olympian height he saw Byron reënacting the drama of the Storm and Stress upon a larger stage, and perhaps this interested him the more as it fell in with the mellow view of his own youth expressed in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

Moreover, Byron's cosmopolitanism interested Goethe as an exponent of what he called "world literature." This favorite idea of the aged poet further illustrates the inclusiveness of his sympathies. "Left to itself," he remarked, "every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one." In his own career the foreign inspiration fertilizes the native stock at every stage; first and always Shakespeare, then the vision of Italy and the classic ideal, and later, in a more limited way, the flight to the Orient and the lyric verse of the *West-östlicher Divan*. From this point of view *Faust II* may appear as a constellation of diverse influences and themes. Some critics are now disposed to dwell less on its philosophy than on its range and virtuosity. It is a pageant of imagery drawn from the various fine arts. Goethe himself thought of it as a "mixed work," part tragedy and part opera. Rich sensory imagery and gnomic

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wisdom are mingled with erudition and mere whim. Yet, when we have said this much about Goethe's catholicity of taste, we are tempted to dwell once again on the humane simplicity and integrity of his work. We must reckon with the complementary half-truths that make the rounded genius. Goethe traveled far and gleaned in many fields, but he always kept out of chaos. His imagination turned toward the Orient, but when Wilhelm von Humboldt urged him to pay more attention to Hindu philosophy, he answered:

I have nothing whatever against Indian thought, but I am afraid of it. It would involve my imagination in the pursuit of the formless and the misshapen; I must guard myself more earnestly than ever against this.

Erudition and virtuosity as such are never the goal. Goethe's "productive criticism" avoids the dangers of extreme provincialism, militant nationalism, and impossibly versatile cosmopolitanism. As an essential part of Goethe's wisdom, it defies classification as mere bellettristic theory, and becomes part of a way of life relevant not only to the fine arts but to history, social life, philosophy, and religion.

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